

Dr. Jennifer Jones - County Council Budget Testimony April 14, 2020

Hello members of the County Council. I am submitting my written testimony this year to ask you to please fully fund the MCPS FY21 budget. In addition, I am asking you to please provide additional funding and request that MCPS earmark that funding, as you have successfully accomplished in the past when you supported closing the Achievement Gap, to support the mental health of our youngest learners in our elementary schools whose mental health is counting on you. It is especially critical now that the Coronavirus has impacted the lives of our elementary school students who are solely dependent on their caregivers to address their increasing levels of anxiety, depression, PTSD, and related effects of increased trauma due to higher levels of domestic violence, child abuse/neglect, and lack of essential basic needs being met during this time.

As you have heard me share in the past, I grew up in Germantown, own a home there, and work at my neighborhood school as an Elementary School Counselor. I am the coordinator for the Elementary School Counselor Caucus affiliated with MCEA. Several of you also know me from the Montgomery County Mental Health Advisory Committee.

Last year when I testified in person along with many of my Elementary School Counselor colleagues about our concerns regarding the need to lower the ES counselor ratio, Council Member Nancy Navarro was the Council President. At the conclusion of my testimony, she stated that the County Council would do everything it could to help us achieve a lower ratio of ES counselors to students at the elementary level. Unfortunately, for FY20 only 6 of our mostly larger elementary schools received an additional .5 counselor position due to a budget amendment proposed by Board of Education member Jeannette Dixon and supported by the testimony of myself and an ES Counselor colleague. While this was a step in the right direction, much more needs to be done.

This year, Dr. Smith did not include any additional ES Counselors or lower the ES Counselor ratio any further in his FY21 budget while he added many other supports in other areas and requested increased funding for those items. He completely left out the additional ES Counselors our elementary students so desperately need. That news was highly disappointing for all of my ES Counselor colleagues and myself as well as many other key stakeholders. I am now asking again for you to help with this effort.

The MCPS Strategic Plan includes BeWell 365. I was on the elementary work group that designed its activities. For years, elementary counselors have shared with you the serious need for a better counselor ratio. Since BeWell 365 is a priority, and all counselors are being directly trained by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) to implement the ASCA model, we need their recommended ratio of 1:250 for **ALL K-12 schools**. Our young elementary students should get the same mental health supports as their middle and high school siblings with ratios already at **1:250**.

Elementary schools usually have only one counselor for 300 to over 700 students. Ashburton E.S. has 953 students with 1.5 counselors so half the time there is one counselor for 953 students. This is definitely not adequate or acceptable.

Nicky Diamond, former MCPS CFO, shared the elementary counselor staffing formula that was adjusted in May 2019, to help identify which 6 elementary schools received the additional .5 counselor:

Title 1 schools remained at 550 for an additional .5 and 650 for an additional 1.0 counselor position.

Focus schools went from needing 650 to 600 students for an additional .5 counselor. All other schools were lowered from needing 750 to 700 students to receive an additional .5 counselor.

We appreciated these changes and hoped the trend would continue. Some schools do not have the allocations promised or were 10-15 students below the cut off. Other schools had counselor allocations taken away because they lost 10-15 students. The ES Counselor staffing formula continues to be highly inequitable and ineffective at supporting our elementary students' varied and serious ongoing mental health needs.

ASCA and a report of the Federal Commission on School Safety referenced research that there is "solid evidence in support of the impact that school mental health programs can have on academics". The earlier we provide mental health support to students, the sooner they have the socioemotional and academic skills they need.

Ruschelle Reuben, MCPS Associate Superintendent of the Office of Student and Family Support and Engagement, said at our MCCPTA Delegates Assembly a few months ago, with only one counselor in most elementary schools, ES counselors do not have time to collect data she was presenting that night so data was missing. She has recognized that one counselor per elementary school just isn't adequate. Others in support of lower elementary counselor ratios include the County Executive, MCEA, MCAAP, MCCPTA leaders, and the Montgomery County Mental Health Advisory Committee. The Black and Brown Coalition also recognizes the need for more counselors.

As an MCPS employee for 28 years, 21 as an Elementary School Counselor, I have seen increasingly serious challenges impact the mental health of our students. In elementary schools, we see many social, emotional, and behavioral issues that were previously only seen in middle and high schools. For example, it is not uncommon for ES Counselors to conduct suicide threat assessments leading to a Crisis Center referrals. During a three week period, I conducted 3 suicide threat assessments for primary grade students. I also then conducted 5 suicide threat assessments in less than 3 days for 2 primary and 3 upper grade students. The needs are overwhelming.

As the only Elementary School Counselor for 500 students, I have helped students exposed to physical abuse, homelessness, parents struggling with addictions and incarceration, serious custody concerns, poverty, chronic absenteeism, and the extremely negative influences of social media causing bullying and other very hurtful words and actions. These challenges interfere with our students' emotional availability to learn. Many of our students have mental health and behavior issues including depression, anxiety, oppositional defiant disorder, and several who have demonstrated violent aggression towards other students, staff, and family members.

As you know, **social and emotional needs cut across all zip codes.** The Elementary School Counselor staffing formulas, as reflected above, show inadequate ratios dependent on FARMs rates and if a school is identified as Title 1 or Focus. My colleagues and I continue to advocate for an equitable **1:250 ratio at ALL elementary schools regardless of FARMs rates.** We know pre-kindergarten leads to success in elementary school, and in the same way, elementary students need more mental health supports to be successful in middle and high school.

In a recent training, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) referenced research supporting the cost effectiveness of adding full-time elementary school counselors (Are school counselors an effective education input? Carrell & Hoekstra, 2011). **The research showed even one additional full-time counselor reduces student misbehavior and increases academic achievement. Hiring one additional full-time elementary counselor is equivalent to raising the quality of every teacher in the school.**

I implore you to continue lowering our elementary counselor ratio. Research shows you will get a huge return on your investment.

Below are the budget testimonies two of my students gave in January at the Board of Education hearings. They gave me permission to include these in my written testimony since they had originally hoped to speak to you in person.

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Budget Testimony**ZyQwan Green****Jan. 15, 2020**

Good evening. My name is ZyQwan Green and I am excited to be here. Today I will be speaking about why we need more counselors in elementary schools.

We have kids who have troubles at home or with other kids at school. They are upset and running out of class and through the halls, screaming and shouting. All of this impacts how they act and how they feel. It messes with their heads so they can't focus or process it. They don't know what to do and they don't have any help or anyone to talk to. Then they need to see Dr. Jones our counselor. When they go to her office and she's busy, because she's trying to help 500 other kids, they don't get the help they need.

Last year I had a lot of trouble with my temper, school work, my emotions, and what was going on at home. A lot of days I was angry even when Dr. Jones tried to help me. I did not like her and we did not get along. This year is totally different. I take a break with her every day and I am in a group with her each week. We talk about my feelings, what's bothering me, and how to solve problems. I have been making much better choices, I am a lot calmer, and more respectful to everyone. I do really well on my chart now. I used to get a lot of thumbs down but now I get 17 out of 18 or most of the time 18 out of 18 points.

All elementary schools should have the same number of counselors as middle and high schools. So if we have 500 kids, we need 2 counselors at our school to help all of our kids with their problems.

Thank you.

Budget Testimony**Marian Mendy****Jan. 15, 2020**

Good evening. My name is Marian and I am in 4th grade. I think we need a lot more counselors in elementary schools because there are 500 kids in my school and it is very hard for Dr. Jones to get to every one of them who needs to see her.

When you want to see Dr. Jones and she is in another group or she is busy helping someone else, you have to wait until another day and sometimes she doesn't even get to you. I feel disappointed when that happens because sometimes it is a really important thing to talk to her about and sometimes it can wait. On a day when it is really important, I feel sad that I can't talk to her because I really need to talk and get help.

When I lost my uncle due to a very bad reason, it was very good when I got to talk to Dr. Jones because she knows what it feels like to lose someone. She read a helpful book with me and talked about how life is sometimes like that – it just hurts for a

while. We talked about a time when Dr. Jones also lost a friend and she gave me ideas about how to help myself try to feel better so I wouldn't be so sad. That way when I go back to class I focus much better on my school work.

Sometimes if kids get mad too easily, she gives them something called a Flash Pass so when they are mad they just come to her and then they can cool down.

Sometimes she is not in her room and when they can't cool down they might hurt someone or do something bad. If we had another counselor, people like them would not do anything bad any more. Having only one counselor for our whole school is very hard. If we had one more counselor, they could help half of the school so Dr. Jones could help the other half. They could both do more groups and lessons and help more kids when they are angry or upset. I also think we should have another counselor who could monitor the halls and other places to help whenever they see a problem. They would be right there to help right away. It would help kids feel calm and more safe.

These days I am feeling much better. A few weeks ago my aunt died and I was able to handle it better after Dr. Jones taught me about how life is. I helped my 2 older cousins and my young cousin with their anger and sadness because Dr. Jones helped me learn how to feel better when my uncle passed away. We need more counselors like Dr. Jones. I recommend one counselor for every 250 students in all elementary schools. Even my cousin in North Carolina has 3 counselors at her elementary school.

Thank you.